Taste & Flair

ISSUE 141 DISTRIBUTED WITH THE MALTA INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

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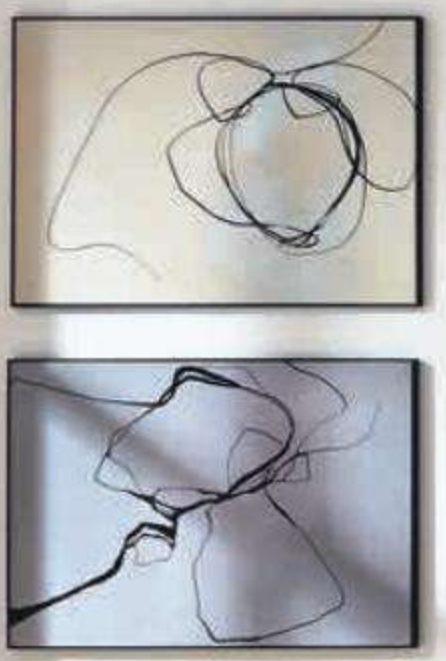

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Welcome

Taste&Flair was founded to bring beauty and colour into the everyday. Even when the outlook is bleak, beauty and colour can bring joy or comfort, whether that comes from looking at art, touring architecture and interiors large or small, savouring a glass of wine, or putting together a meal infused with memories and seasonal flavours. These are some of the ingredients we stirred into this issue with the help of our contributors. Michael Diacono turned bright green seasonal asparagus from Gozo into a medley of dishes, Claire Borg indulged a junior household member's decision to turn vegan "for two days", Megan and Amy Mallia's recipes stir up sweet nostalgia. As the days turn cooler, weekend visits to museums and art galleries become more alluring. The Sala Nobile of the Cathedral Museum at Mdina, already worth visiting for its beautifully redecorated interior alone, now displays a priceless collection of art, artefacts, and fine furniture donated by private collector. On the home front, we take a look at an old Maltese house that's been reshaped for contemporary living while retaining its homely character, which makes a change from ripping a house apart and replacing everything. As with most things, details matter in interior design too. Small touches, like an ornament in a natural form, can bring life to an interior, as our feature on the enduring tortoise motif shows. This month, we visited a boutique winery styled with the feel of a private home rather than an industrial site, and with meticulous detailing. Still on the subject of wine, Andrew Azzopardi explains why vintage matters. We hope you enjoy this issue of Taste&Flair. We'll be back in November.

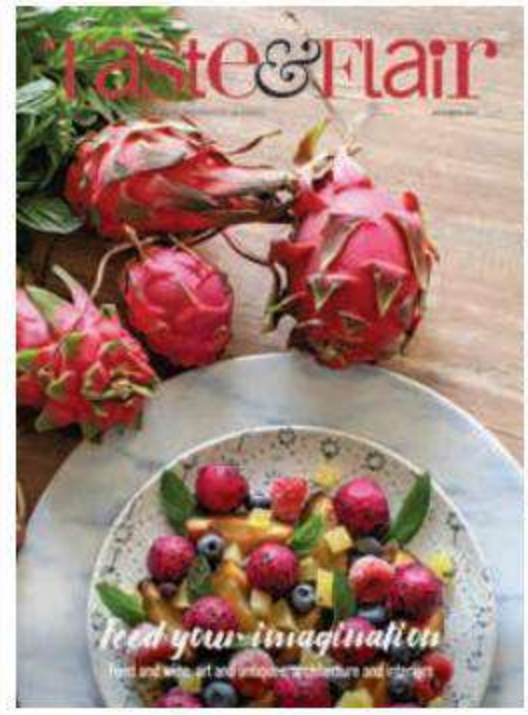
If you missed any issue of Taste&Flair and want a copy, we may be able to help so please do get in touch with us by email, Messenger, or on Instagram.

Corinne

"All I want is for my works to lighten the heart and flood the eyes and the soul with light"

Joaquim Mir Trinxet, private art manifesto, 1928.

View of l'Aleixar, oil on canvas, c. 1915-1919, Bilbao Fine Arts Museum collection.



Claire Borg's Fruit Platter
See feature starting on page 22. Photograph: Claire Borg

Taste&Flair

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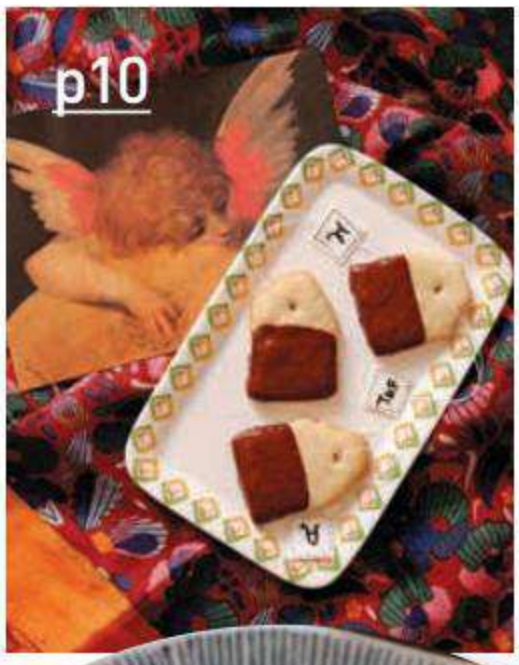
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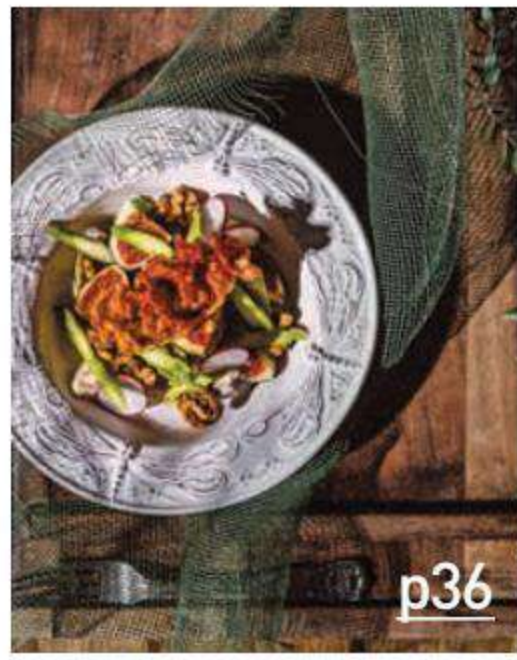
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sweet nostalgia

Breakfast, teatime, or whenever you feel like something sweet, Megan and Amy Mallia's homely snacks are a treat

Styling and photography: Megan Mallia

Nanna Rose's chocolate sauce

Serve this warm with freshly cooked crêpes or pour it cold over ice-cream. Any leftover sauce will store well in the fridge for a few days, and may be gently reheated in a pan for a few minutes – or in a microwave oven for a few seconds – when needed.

Preparation and cooking: 15 minutes

You will need

3 tablespoons of soft brown sugar
3 tablespoons of pure cocoa powder
1 tablespoon of butter
1 cup of double cream
½ cup of milk

1. Put all the ingredients into a small saucepan over a low heat, and stir gently with a wooden spoon until well combined.

2. When the sauce begins to bubble, remove the pan from the heat.

3. Use a metal spoon to drizzle the warm sauce over the crêpes.

4. Store any extra sauce in an airtight container in the fridge, where it will keep well for 2-3 days.

Chocolate-dipped Teabag Biscuits

This biscuit recipe is an old family favourite. Ever since we were little, we've used this as a base for literally thousands of biscuits in all sorts of shapes and sizes, with all types of toppings for every occasion. This "teabag" adaptation is perfect for dipping into a cup of tea or hot chocolate to perk you up for the day ahead. They're just as delicious for dunking without the chocolate, so leave out that step if you prefer plain biscuits.

Makes 20-25 biscuits
Preparation: 35 minutes, including chilling time
Baking: 15 minutes

YOU WILL NEED

1 egg, lightly beaten • 100g butter, room temperature
100g sugar • 225g plain flour, sifted
150g dark chocolate (for dipping) • white cotton thread
paper, for tags

1. Line a baking sheet with greaseproof paper and preheat the oven to 180°C degrees (gas mark 4).

2. In a large bowl, cream the butter and sugar together with an electric mixer until the mixture is light and fluffy. Use a spatula to scrape down the sides of the mixing bowl, then add the egg and mix it in well.

3. Add the flour a spoonful at a time, stirring the mixture thoroughly after each spoonful, until the mixture comes together to form a dough. Wrap the dough in cling film, and allow it to rest in the fridge for around 15 minutes.

4. Lightly flour your work surface, then roll out the dough until it is about 5mm thick. Use a sharp knife to cut the dough into teabag-shaped biscuits and a cocktail stick to make a hole near the top of each one.

5. Place the biscuits on the lined baking sheet and bake them in the pre-heated oven for around 12-15 minutes until they're lightly golden. Remove the tray from the oven and transfer the biscuits to a wire rack. They will be soft and pliable at first, but will solidify as they cool down.

6. Run some cotton thread through each teabag biscuit, and attach a paper tag to the end.

7. Melt the chocolate by placing it in a heatproof bowl set over a pot of water on a gentle heat (*bain-marie)*, stirring it occasionally with a wooden spoon.

8. Dip each "teabag" halfway into the melted chocolate until it is well coated and place it on a sheet of greaseproof paper. Set the coated biscuits aside until the chocolate sets.

9. The biscuits can be stored in an airtight container for up to a few days. Any extra ones will freeze well, too.

Fig Jam with Whisky

One of our maternal great-grandmothers liked to put the abundance of fresh, end-of-season figs *(farkizzan)* to good use by making jars of jewel-coloured jam.

Dried figs, on the other hand, are a reminder of many a Christmas past, when they were stuffed with walnuts, sharing a plate with marzipan-filled dates rolled in sugar, to be served with coffee after a sumptuous meal.

Here's a nod to our great-grandmother's jam, but made with dried figs and with a hint of whisky for added flavour. The final result is moreish both when spread on fresh, crusty bread or served with cheese.

Makes around 6 jars
Preparation and cooking: 80 minutes, including soaking time

YOU WILL NEED

20ml freshly-squeezed lemon juice
50ml whisky
600g sugar
750g dried figs, left whole
900ml water
6 empty jars, sterilised

1. Pour the water into a large, heavy-bottomed pot, add the dried figs, then bring it to the boil over a moderate heat.

2. When the pot starts to boil, remove it from the heat and set it aside for around half an hour until the figs plump up.

3. Using a slotted spoon, remove the figs from the pot, reserving the water.

4. Add the lemon juice, whisky and sugar to the reserved liquid in the pot, and bring it to the boil, stirring occasionally to ensure that the sugar dissolves and does not stick.

5. Lower the heat, and simmer the liquid for around 15-20 minutes until it begins to thicken slightly.

6. Meanwhile, chop the figs into small pieces, discarding the stems and preheat the oven to 150°C.

7. Once the liquid has begun to thicken, add the chopped figs to the pot.

8. Raise the heat until the mixture has begun to boil, stirring it occasionally, then lower the heat once again and allow the mixture to simmer to a jammy consistency (15-20 minutes).

9. Around 12 minutes after the mixture starts simmering, sterilise the jars and lids by placing them in the oven for 10 minutes.

10. Remove the jam from the heat and the jars and lids from the oven. Use a ladle to fill the jars until the jam is 1cm from the jars' top edge. Put the lids in place and tighten them immediately.

11. Allow the jam to cool completely, by which point the jars should self-seal.

12. Once you open a jar, store it in the fridge. Any unopened, properly-sealed jars will store well for a few months if kept in a dark cupboard, away from heat.

Loacker

NEW IMPROVED RECIPE

Quadratini NAPOLITANER

Quadratini CHOCOLATE

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Crêpes with Chocolate Sauce

Crêpes are a quick-to-put-together breakfast, made all the more tempting when served either with homemade chocolate sauce or apples cooked in cinnamon. The crêpes taste best when freshly-cooked, but can also be cooked, cooled, and then frozen in between layers of greaseproof paper, which is handy for lazy Sunday mornings. You'll need to warm them gently in an oven without defrosting them first.

Makes 6 large crêpes
Preparation and cooking: 20 minutes

YOU WILL NEED

225g plain flour
25g caster sugar (optional)
2 eggs
300ml milk
1 tablespoon butter, melted
a little oil, for frying

1. Sift the flour into a bowl, and make a well in its centre. In a separate bowl, whisk the eggs, butter and milk together.

2. Pour the wet ingredients gradually into the flour a little at a time, whisking well in between each addition. Cover the bowl and let it stand in the fridge for around 20 minutes.

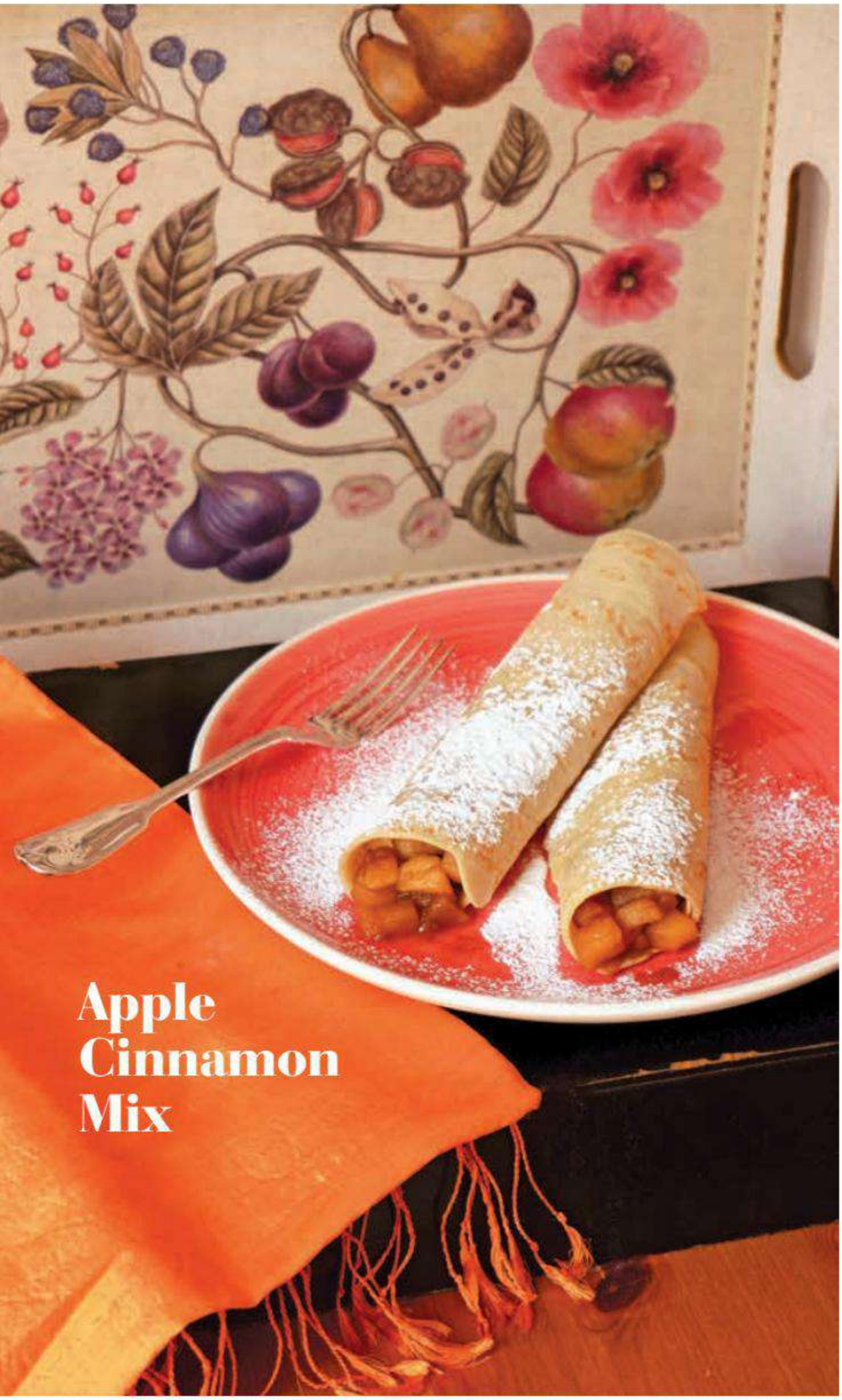
3. Heat a little bit of oil in a large, non-stick frying pan (or a pancake pan, if you have one).

4. Use a large ladle to scoop up some batter and add it to the pan. Swirl it around immediately to help it spread out evenly.

5. Cook the crêpe for a minute or two until it begins to turn very lightly golden, then flip it over with the help of a spatula and cook the other side for a further minute or so.

6. Repeat the process with the rest of the mixture, storing the cooked crêpes on a warm plate covered with a clean cloth.

7. Serve the crêpes on warmed plates, drizzled with chocolate sauce.



Apple Cinnamon Mix

This apple cinnamon mix is simple to make, yet warmly comforting when served with freshly-made crêpes. It also tastes good when served with homemade vanilla ice-cream. Any leftovers will store well in the fridge for 2-3 days.

Preparation and cooking: 15-20 minutes

YOU WILL NEED

2 apples
1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon
2 tablespoons brown sugar
1 tablespoon water
icing sugar, for serving

1. Peel, core and dice the apples. Place them in a saucepan with the sugar, cinnamon and water. Mix well.

2. Heat the mixture gently, stirring slowly until the sugar has dissolved and the apples are cooked through. You may need to add a little extra water.

3. Spoon the warm, stewed apples onto a freshly cooked crêpe and roll it up. Repeat with the other crêpes.

4. Place the filled crêpes on warmed plates, dust them with icing sugar, and serve at once.

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COFFEE WITH A CONSCIENCE

The Corinthia Palace, renowned for its impeccable service and high standards, has recently opened Josephine's, a new speciality coffee concept. Josephine's offers a plant-based menu, while the coffee experience promises to be unlike any other on our islands.

New speciality coffee concept Josephine's at Corinthia Palace has introduced Origin Coffee to Malta. Origin is an independently owned roasting company founded by Tom Sobey in Cornwall 15 years ago. Sobey, who grew up helping at his father's coffee roasting business, was inspired to found Origin while travelling to Australia and experiencing its progressive coffee culture.

What sets Origin apart from many other coffee roasters, aside from the quality of their brew, is their triple bottom line approach. Companies that use this framework strive to create social, environmental, and financial value and Origin is, in fact, a Certified B Corporation. This means that their impact on their workers, community, environment, and customers is evaluated regularly.

Origin, as the name implies, source their coffee beans directly from farmers, cutting out any middlemen, which enables them to pay farmers better prices. Freda Yuan, Origin's Head of Coffee and a multi-award-winning taster and qualified Q-grader, is the person travelling the world in search of the highest quality coffee beans. "She visits our farmers and carries out quality control with them," says Jana Slamova, Education Manager at Origin. "Freda then chooses the coffee beans and ships a sample to us in the UK, where we roast them and test them again"

The rigorous quality control does not stop at the sourcing stage, either, with special care being taken from the roasting to the brewing stages. "Freda believes that the coffee should be roasted to its sweetest potential," explains Slamova. "You would never find our coffee to be very dark roasted, because the longer you roast it, the more bitter it gets. And making the perfect cup of Origin coffee is a precise art, like baking. We recommend a ratio of one part coffee to two parts water, extracted for between 28 and 34 seconds to create that most perfect cup of coffee."

At Josephine's, Origin coffee can be enjoyed in a variety of drinks, including classics like the Espresso and Cappuccino, and the coffee can also be purchased to enjoy at home. Whether customers choose to sip on their beverage within Josephine's intimate space, surrounded by lush greenery in Corinthia Palace's immaculate gardens or in the comfort of their own home, there is little doubt that Origin is the perfect choice for Josephine's conscious customer.

For more information on Josephine's or Corinthia Palace, visit **www.corinthia.com/palace** and **@corinthiapalace** and **@josephinescoffee** on Instagram.

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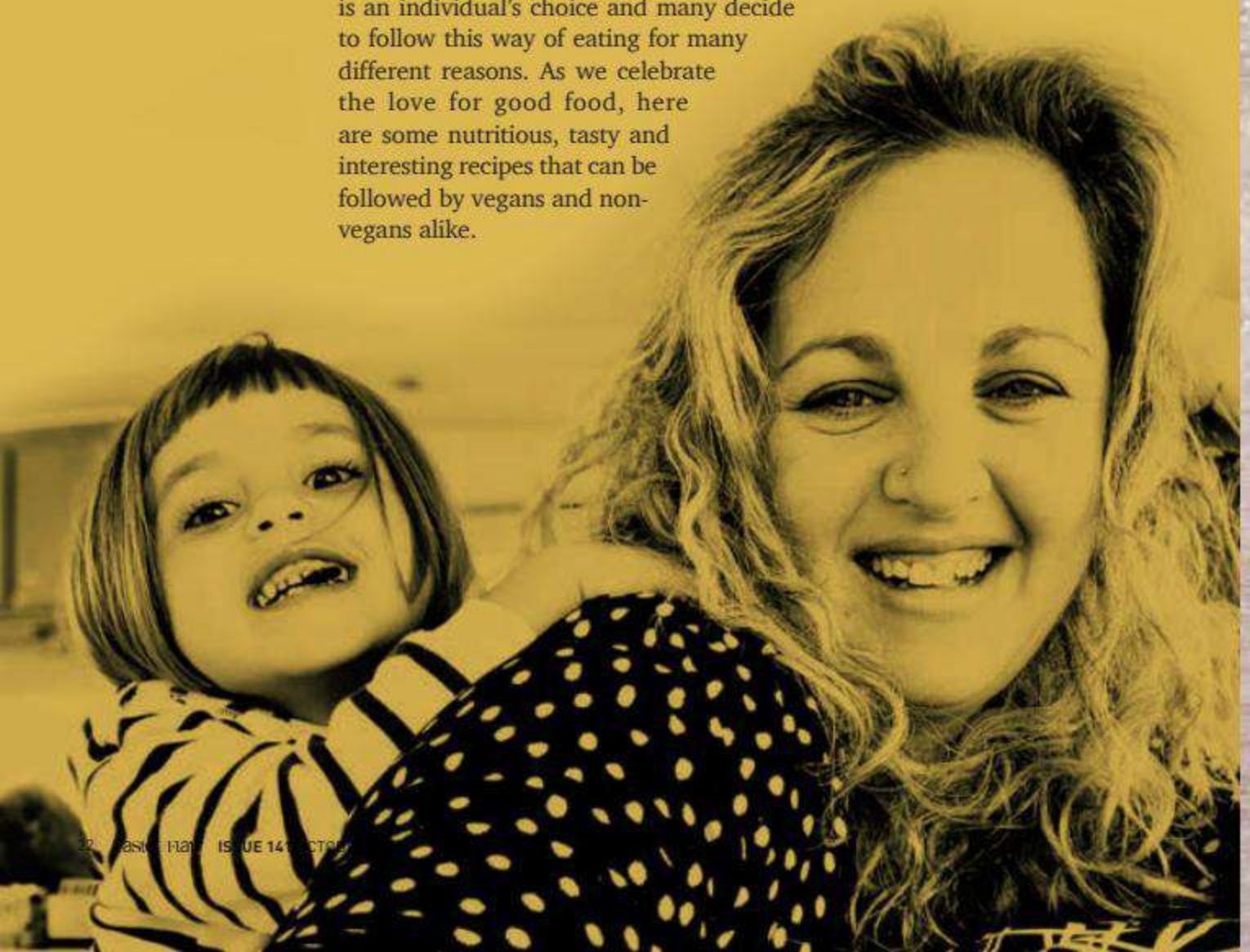
LUCIA'S CHOICE

A love of food starts in the home, trying out different flavours and ways of cooking and eating.

Food and photography by Claire Borg.

A few weeks ago, my daughter Lucia, who is six years old, looked at me and stated "mum, I will be vegan for two days." So I decided to accompany her and make these two days as interesting as possible for her. We went grocery shopping and the shops let her choose her favorite vegetables and fruits. I really wanted to prepare food she would enjoy without feeling deprived.

The decision to "be vegan" was hers. She took a break when she couldn't resist an ice cream from her favorite ice cream shop. But we let that one slip. Being vegan is an individual's choice and many decide to follow this way of eating for many different reasons. As we celebrate the love for good food, here are some nutritious, tasty and interesting recipes that can be followed by vegans and non-vegans alike.



VEGAN T&F

Raw almond & Basil Pesto

The finished product can be placed in a jar and kept in the fridge for about 4 days. If you want to keep it for longer, freeze it in portions.

YOU WILL NEED

150g raw almonds
1 or 2 cloves of garlic
1 teaspoon salt
2 big handfuls of fresh basil leaves
extra virgin olive oil

TO SERVE

purslane leaves
vegan grated cheese
1 handful of French beans

1. Using a food processor, blitz (pulse) the almonds until fine. Add the garlic and salt and blitz for another few seconds.

2. Add the basil leaves and enough oil to be able to blend into a paste. For a smooth pesto, blend a bit longer.

3. To prepare the pasta, bring a pot of salted water to the boil. Add the pasta and the trimmed beans. Let them cook together, then remove the pot from the heat and drain the mixture.

4. Stir in a generous amount of pesto and a drizzle of olive oil. Season to taste.

5. After I plated the pasta, I sprinkled each serving with purslane leaves (a wild plant) and a sprinkle of vegan grated cheese.

DUMPLING DOUGH

If you plan to freeze the dumplings, quickly freeze each batch as soon as you prepare them. If you're going to cook them, don't let them sit around too long as the juices from the filling will soak the raw pastry and make them very soggy and difficult to lift off any surface.

Makes enough dough for 35-45 dumplings

FOR THE DOUGH

500g all-purpose flour (low gluten)
230-240ml water
1 teaspoon fine salt

FOR THE FILLING

6 cloves of garlic, crushed
3 spring onions, finely sliced
150g mushrooms, finely chopped
250g sweet corn kernels
¼ of a cabbage, finely sliced
a 2-inch piece of ginger, peeled and grated
some coriander leaves
some mint leaves
a handful of spinach, chard or kale, finely sliced
1 teaspoon Chinese 5-spice powder
salt and chili or black pepper, to taste
2 tablespoons sweet chili sauce
2 tablespoons tamari or soy sauce
a little bit of oil

1. First, make the dough. Place the ingredients in a mixer and use the hook attachment to knead the ingredients for 6-7 minutes until a soft dough forms. Cover the dough with cling film and let it rest at room temperature for 30 minutes to an hour.

2. While the dough rests, make the filling. In a little oil, cook the crushed garlic and finely chopped mushrooms for about 4 minutes. Turn off the heat and add the remaining ingredients. Season with salt and chili or black pepper, and set it aside.

3. When you're ready to make the dumplings, take half of the dough and leave the other half covered. Roll the first half into a long "stick" 2.5 cm to 3 cm in diameter and use a sharp knife to cut it into even pieces. Roll each small piece of dough in some flour one at a time to prevent them sticking.

4. Sprinkle flour onto your work surface. Then, taking one piece of dough at a time, roll it out into a small disc to use as dumpling wrappers. The discs should be about 1 mm thin and should all be as even as possible. You will need to work fast as the wrappers will dry out quickly.

5. To fill the wrappers, place a dough disc into the palm of your hand and then scoop some of the filling into its centre. Fold over the dough and pinch the edges to close the dumpling firmly. If the edges of the wrapper are too dry, use a fingertip to gently dab them with cold water. Repeat with the remaining pastry and filling until all are done.

6. I cooked my dumplings in a bamboo steamer and simply steamed them for 13 minutes. Serve with Chinese brown vinegar as a dipping sauce, or with soy sauce, if you prefer. I also like to serve the dumplings with chili oil.

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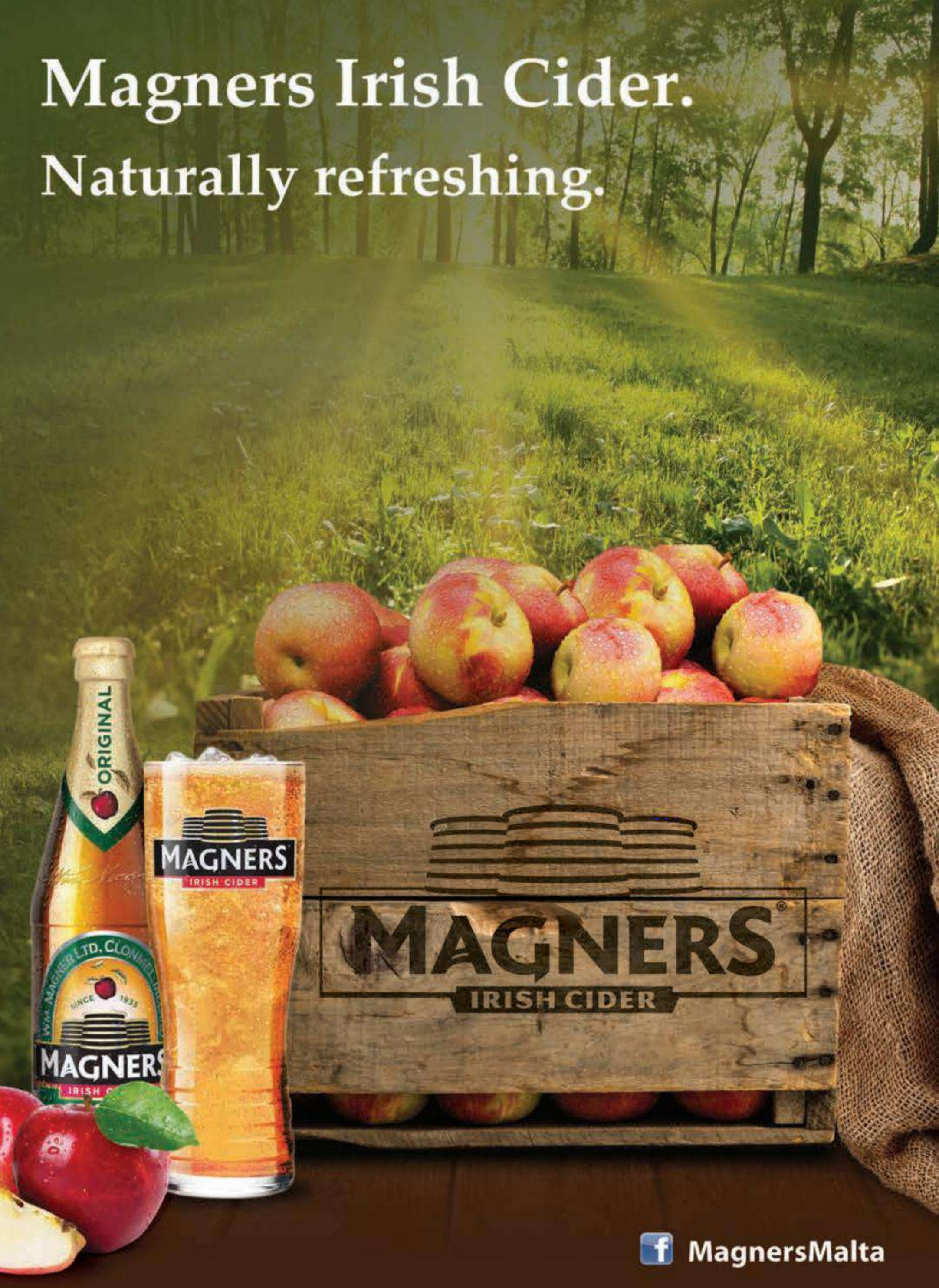


MagnersMalta

VEGAN FOCACCIA RIPIENA

Makes 1 trayful when baked at 200°C

FOR THE FOCACCIA

11g dry yeast
500g strong white flour (for bread)
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon sugar
50ml olive oil (and a bit more to drizzle)
50ml white wine
225ml warm water

FOR THE FILLING

200g frozen spinach
6 cloves of garlic
3 tablespoons vegan pesto
200g vegan mozzarella-style cheese
salt and pepper to taste
some olive oil

1. Thaw and drain any excess fluids from the spinach. Sauté the leaves and garlic in a little olive oil. Season to taste and let the mixture cool completely.

2. Mix the dry yeast with water and let it stand for 5-10 minutes.

3. Mix the salt, sugar and flour together in a large bowl. Make a well in the centre, add the yeasty water, and use the tip of a knife to push and mix some of the flour into the well to form a smooth paste. Cover the bowl and let it stand for 15-20 minutes.

4. Add the olive oil and white wine to the flour well. Mix all the ingredients together to form a soft dough. Turn it out onto a clean, lightly floured surface and knead it for 10 minutes.

5. Place the dough in a clean bowl, cover it and leave to rest until it doubles in size (about 90 minutes). Knock it back, let it rest, then roll it open.

6. Place the filling (cheese, pesto and spinach) on one half of the dough. Fold over the other half and press down on the edges to seal them.

7. Put the filled dough on an oiled baking tray, cover it with a cloth and let it prove again for 20 minutes.

8. Drizzle the surface with oil, sprinkle on some sea salt, and bake it in a hot oven set to 200°C for about 30-40 minutes. To know whether it's cooked, tap the underside. If the focaccia's done, it will sound hollow.

9. Serve this drizzled with olive oil, some halved cherry tomatoes, basil leaves and some fresh rosemary scattered over the top.

VEGAN DANDAN NOODLES

This is really simple to prepare and involves very little cooking time.

Serves 2

YOU WILL NEED

200g noodles of your choice
1 handful leafy green vegetable leaves like bok choi or baby spinach
1 small handful peanuts
2 spring onions
1 small cucumber
1 carrot
white cabbage
some cooked green beans
coriander leaves
fresh chili (optional)

FOR THE PASTE

1 tablespoon tahini
1 tablespoon water
1 tablespoon peanut butter
2 tablespoons light soya sauce
1 tablespoon dark soya sauce
1 tablespoon rice vinegar
1 tablespoon chilli oil
1 clove of garlic minced
1 teaspoon sugar
1 tablespoon grated ginger

1. Make the paste by whisking all the ingredients together until they are well combined.

2. Toast the peanuts in a hot, dry pan. Let them cool and then crush them. Trim the spring onions and chop them finely. Wash and shred the cucumber. Grate the carrot and finely slice the white cabbage

3. Cook and drain the noodles. Let them cool slightly and mix them with the paste. Add all the vegetables and mix them well.

4. Serve the noodles drizzled with more chili oil.

PEA & POTATO SALAD

Lemon zest "lifts" the flavour of the salad, giving it a light tang.

Serves 4-6

YOU WILL NEED

1 kg new potatoes
300g frozen peas, blanched
150g baby spinach leaves
2 tablespoons whole grain mustard
fresh dill
fresh mint
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1 tablespoon sweet chili sauce
4 tablespoons olive oil
juice of 1 lemon
1 tablespoon white wine vinegar
zest of half a lemon
salt and pepper to taste

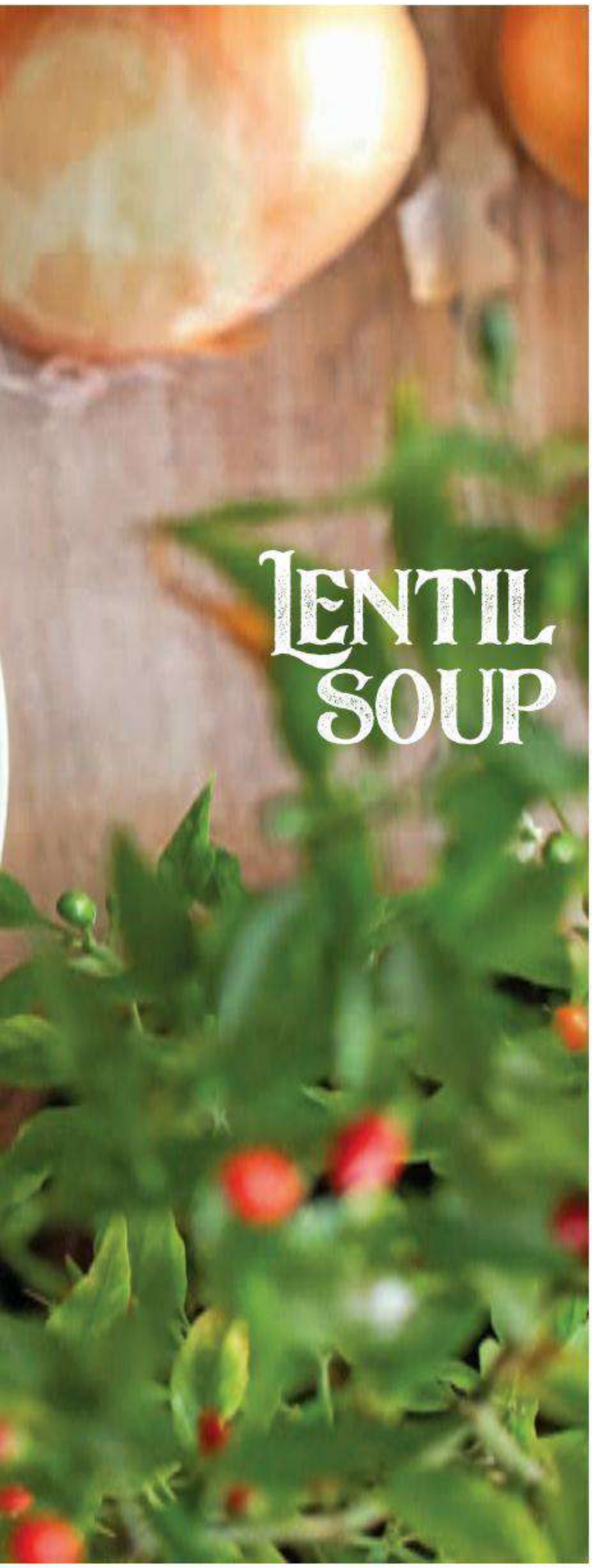
1. Make a salad dressing by whisking the Dijon mustard, sweet chili, oil, lemon juice and vinegar together. Set the dressing aside while you prepare the salad.

2. Boil the halved potatoes until cooked, then drain them and put them into a large bowl. When they are still warm, pour the dressing over them and toss them till they are well coated.

3. Add the lemon zest and season to taste. Set the bowl aside to let the potatoes cool.

4. Add the finely chopped dill, mint, wholegrain mustard and peas. If the salad looks too dry, add some more olive oil.

5. Just before serving, mix in the baby spinach leaves.



LENTIL SOUP

You'll need a large pot for this. If you make more than you need for a single meal, freeze the leftover soup in portions.

Serves 8

YOU WILL NEED

150g green or brown lentils
150g black beluga lentils
150g red lentils
3 stalks fresh celery (karfus), finely chopped
1 medium onion
2 carrots
1 large potato
1 leek
2 large tablespoons tomato paste (kunserva)
1 bay leaf
vegetable oil
salt and pepper to taste

1. Wash the lentils, put them in a bowl, cover them with fresh water and leave them to soak overnight, if possible. If you are short of time, after washing the lentils, soak them in hot water for about an hour. Then drain and rinse them before cooking.

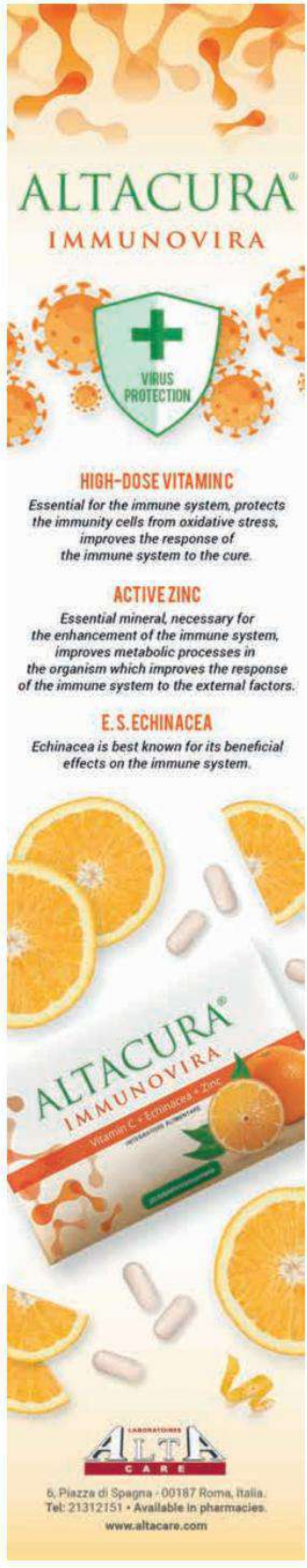
2. Finely chop the onion and leek and cook them in a little oil in a large, deep pot. When they turn translucent, add the finely chopped celery and carrots and cook them for about 5 minutes.

3. Next, add the bay leaf and the tomato paste. Mix them well and then add the lentils.

4. Pour in around 2 litres of boiling water (you might need more, depending on how long you soaked the lentils). Add the finely chopped potato, stir well, cover the pot and let it simmer for 70 to 80 minutes.

5. If you haven't soaked lentils long enough, cooking time might take a bit longer. Check the liquid occasionally and stir the pot frequently, as you might need to add more water during cooking.

6. Season the soup with salt and pepper only once it is ready. Serve warm.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FRUIT PLATTER

This dish is easy to make as all it requires is preparation and assembly. The dragon fruit shown here were grown in Gozo.

YOU WILL NEED

dragon fruit
yellow kiwi fruit
fresh plums
blueberries
raspberries
mint leaves

1. Cut the dragon fruit in half and use a melon baller to scoop out the flesh. Peel the yellow kiwi fruit and dice the flesh.

2. Wash the plums and use a sharp knife to cut them in half lengthwise. Remove the fruit stones and cut each half of the fruit into smaller pieces.

3. Wash the raspberries and let them drain properly. Wash the blueberries and shake off the excess water. Spread them out on a clean cloth to dry. Wash the mint leaves and pat them dry.

4. Assemble the salad by scattering the fruit on a platter, starting with the plums, then the kiwi fruit and dragon fruit, and the berries. Finally, scatter the mint leaves over the top.

5. Store the platter in the fridge until serving time.

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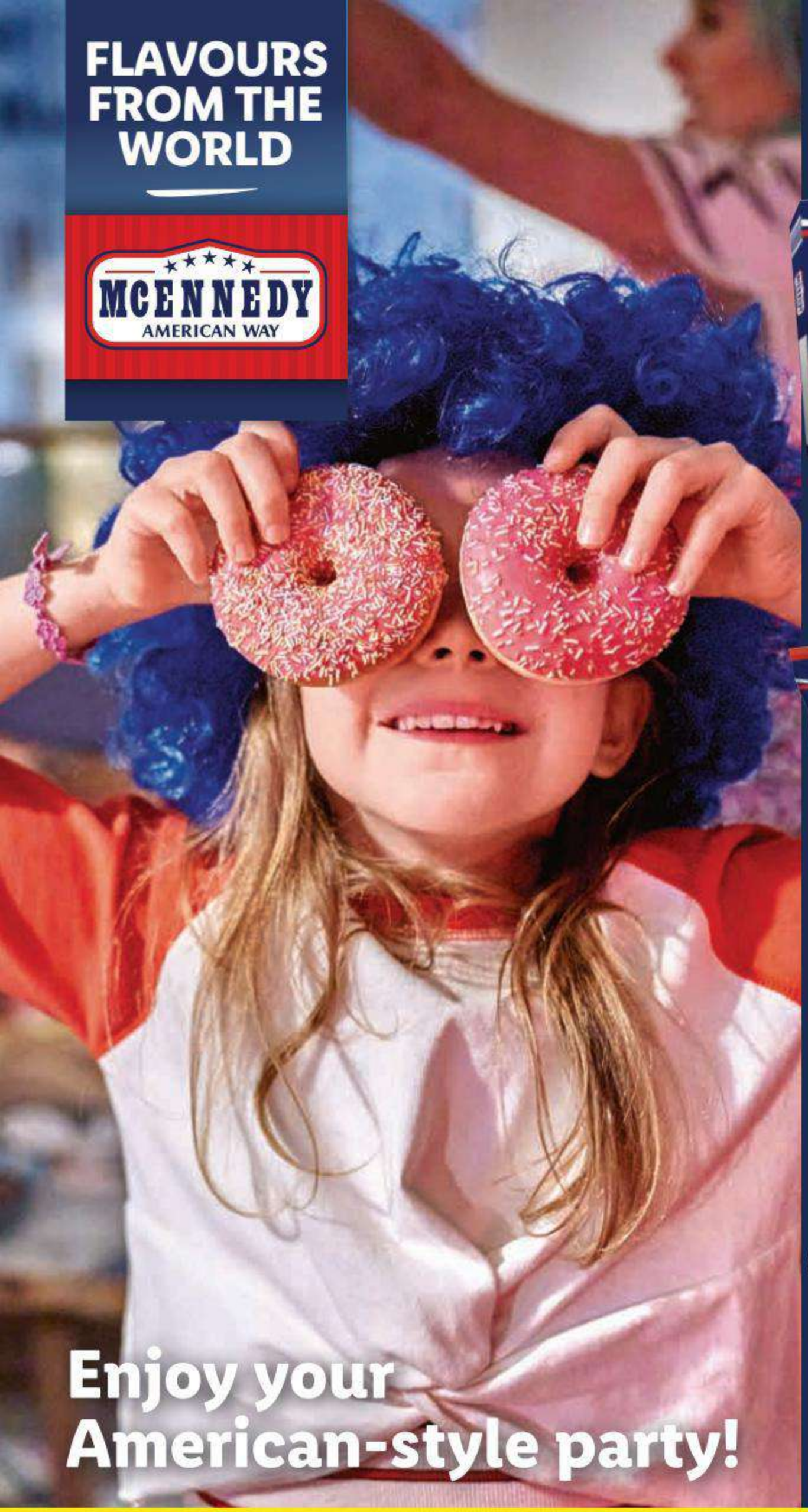

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AGE IS MORE THAN JUST A NUMBER

A wine's vintage tells you much about its quality and desirability. Andrew Azzopardi demystifies the numbers.

A case of 12 bottles of the 1983 vintage Château Lafite Rothschild currently sells for €7,500 while the 1982 vintage trades at €40,000. This crazy figure shows that a wine's vintage year alone may push the price up by over €2000 on just one bottle. 1982 is widely considered as the first true vintage year of the modern era. The growing conditions during this vintage were considered perfect. The huge price is not just because of the great growing conditions, but also because of the consistent and exuberant praise of Robert Parker, the world's most successful wine critic to date, which earned him, as well as this legendary vintage in Bordeaux, respect for later generations.

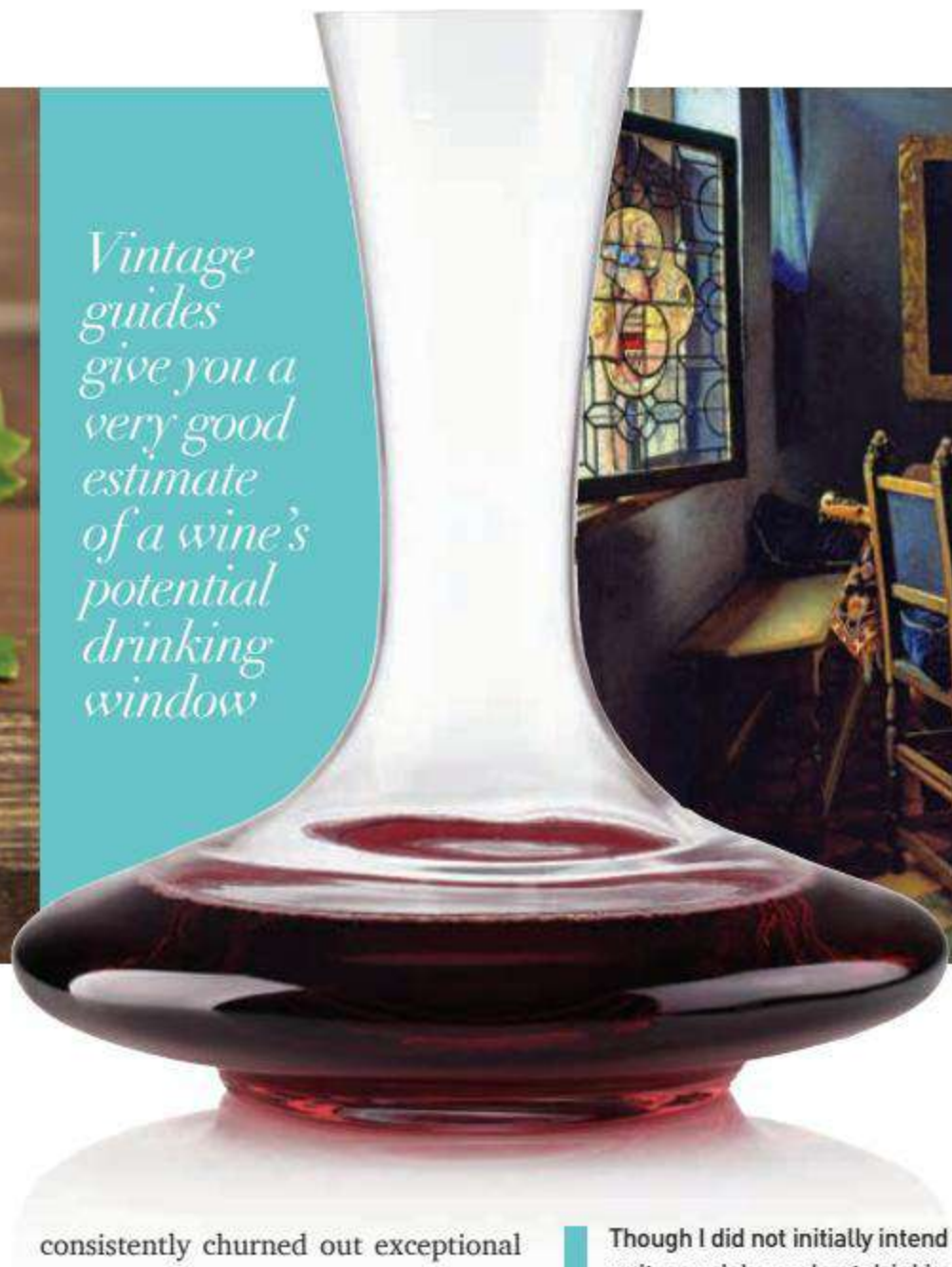
Unless we're discussing sparkling wines, Ports, Madeira or sherry, most quality still-wines have a vintage year. A single vintage wine is simply a wine produced from grapes from a single harvest year or a single crop. To be labelled "single vintage," the wine must comprise 75-95% of the same grape harvest - the percentage will vary within that range depending on the wine region. It is commonly understood that the growing season can greatly affect the taste and quality of the wine because the weather has a direct impact on the quality of the fruit. The typical defining feature of a vintage is ultimately sunshine or lack thereof. Too much sunshine and the grapes may get sunburned or "*raisined*" before ripening, resulting in flabby wines, whereas little sunshine, too much rain and cloud cover may stop the grapes from fully ripening and even promote disease such as grey rot. Finally, both extremes will deliver lower quality grapes and consequently inferior wine.

However, there are wine-producing areas where there is much less weather variation year-on-year. These are often more predictable, consistent and sunny areas such as southern Spain, Portugal, Australia, California, Argentina and Malta. In these areas with fewer vintage variations, a wine from a renowned producer from a relatively "bad" vintage usually trumps wine from a mediocre producer in a great year. Conversely, areas such as Bordeaux, Burgundy, Alsace, Rhône, Tuscany, Piedmont, Northern Spain (Rioja, Rias Baixas and Ribera del Duero), Germany and New Zealand, have less predictable weather and are highly susceptible to weather variation. Adding weather extremes such as frost, ice, strong winds and cloud cover can often even mean losing up to 50% of the crop. Clearly, growing grapes in these areas is no mean feat and unexpected weather variations can instantaneously destroy half the crop and even reduce the quality of the remaining grapes.

In order to fully appreciate the huge praise of the fabulous 1982 vintage, I think it's important to recognize that Bordeaux was afflicted with 21 years of hard vintages. Since 1961, Bordeaux experienced extremely tough and inconsistent vintages year after year until that particularly famous year. Finally, the region was gifted with a historic vintage of opulence, sensuous textures and rich layers of complexity that is still celebrated till today. The wine industry took heed, the Bordelaise people rejoiced, and their wine prices skyrocketed.

The wine industry has evolved and improved a hundredfold since 1982. Winemaking techniques have developed at a rapid pace – so much so that winemakers have become extremely savvy on not only saving their crops, but also on using clever methods to retain the best possible quality despite many setbacks. The effects of global warming, where average temperatures have risen, has somewhat positively impacted winemaking in areas such as Bordeaux, Tuscany and Burgundy since the warmer weather has been ripening the grapes earlier in the season, allowing Bordeaux to have

Vintage guides give you a very good estimate of a wine's potential drinking window



The Glass of Wine, Johannes Vermeer, c. 1660, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

consistently churned out exceptional vintages since 2014.

But, fundamentally, it is all about how the vintage affects you as a wine drinker. Firstly, around 97% of all wine produced is meant to be drunk young (usually within the first 2 years of release) and for this huge chunk of the wines, the vintage is more of an indication of whether the wine has been standing on the shelf way too long to be consumed. However, for the remaining 3% of oft-premium and super-premium wines, the vintage is an indicator for the consumer on when to pop the cork. Many of these cellar-worthy wines are released with overbearing fruit tones and aggressive tannins that need time to soften in the bottle, gaining complexity and elegance.

Strangely enough, opposite to bulk wines which are more often than not drunk too old, age-worthy wines are too often drunk too young. Notwithstanding the vast selection of top-quality wines available at restaurants in Malta nowadays, it remains one of my pet hates to see such young, virtually undrinkable fine wines on many a wine list. To pre-empt their wines being consumed too early, some French producers, such as Château Latour, have recently decided to release them much later then the rest of Bordeaux, when they are just about ready to be appreciated.

Though I did not initially intend to write much here about drinking windows, I believe that lesser vintages play an important role in the wine industry. Many super premium, investment-worthy wines have, unfortunately, become inaccessible to most of us but the lesser vintages can offer a window of opportunity to the savvy consumer to find that special wine at an attractive price. Since these lesser vintages should be consumed much younger, less patience, space and money are needed to enjoy these wines which are beautiful in their own right. Many critics even believe that, due to the incredible steps forward in winemaking, a lesser vintage now may possibly match a great vintage of yesteryear. Naturally, that means that the great vintages of today are the very best yet.

Currently, their latest vintage is 2013.

The right time to open a bottle of wine principally depends on the individual consumer's taste, but vintage guides give you a very good estimate of a wine's potential drinking window. Assuming that the wine has been stored properly, vintage guides can be a great way to get an idea of the quality of a certain vintage and thus its potential. The guides use a score out of 100. A wine with a lesser score for a vintage in Bordeaux should be drunk a lot younger than a great one. But they simply remain a general guideline and there will always be a few exceptions to the rule. Peter Sichel, who was making Château Palmer at the time, had said straight after the 1983 vintage, that the 1983 was better than the 1982. Many agree and despite all the vintage guides showing the 1982 as the stronger Bordeaux vintage, the 1983 Château Palmer is now fetching a good €200 more per bottle than its predecessor. For this very reason, it's important to discuss vintages with your wine merchant who should be able to guide you on whether to keep a wine for the long haul or open it with gusto today. ■

Andrew Azzopardi is a wine specialist certified by the Wine and Spirit Education Trust

BOUNTY FROM GOZO

The taste and texture of asparagus fresh from the fields is incomparable. Michael Diacono turns a batch of autumn asparagus into tempting, easy-to-make dishes.

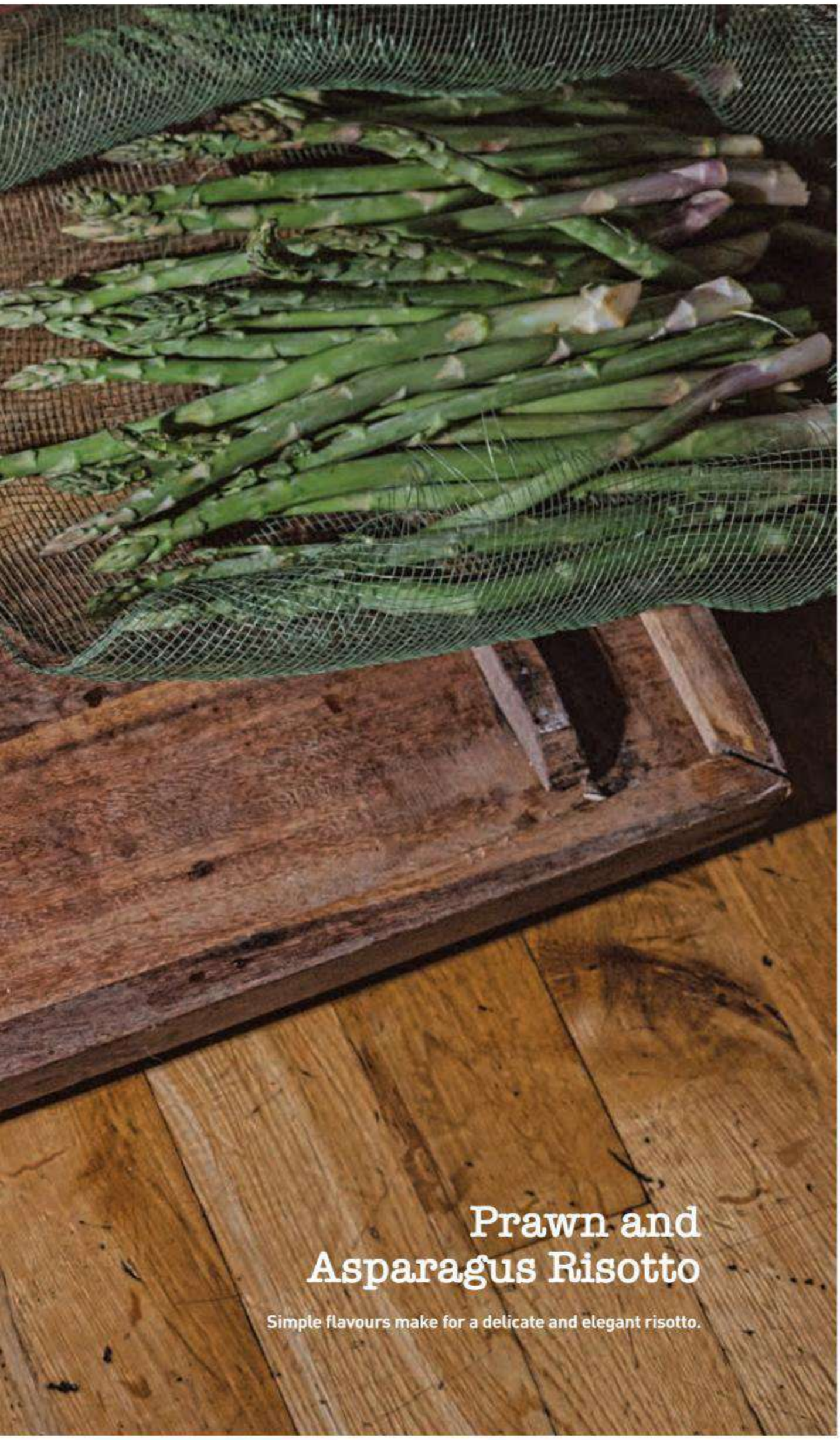
Food: Michael Diacono, chef patron, Giuseppi's Bar and Bistro
Styling and photography: Brian Grech
Wine recommendation: Andrew Azzopardi

The past few years have seen a new vegetable, grown primarily in Gozo, enter the Maltese market. Sweet and delicious asparagus is available twice a year: in spring, and then for a shorter season in autumn. It's a very versatile ingredient which may be prepared in so many easy recipes. Here are a few to try before the end of the season.

Wine pairing

Asparagus is notoriously difficult to pair with wine. The chlorophyll, which gives asparagus its beautiful green flavour, together with other acidic compounds, can make wine taste harsh or metallic. Depending on the cooking method and ingredients, there are some wines that do pair well. There are some good wine recommendations here, but considering the main ingredient is Gozo asparagus, you might also like to try some of Gozo's fine white wines which would also combine perfectly with some of these dishes.

Andrew Azzopardi



Prawn and Asparagus Risotto

Simple flavours make for a delicate and elegant risotto.

Serves 4
Preparation and cooking: 60 minutes
Recommended wine: a crisp and refreshing verdicchio

YOU WILL NEED

500g fresh red prawns
extra-virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 medium onion, finely chopped
1 tomato, peeled and chopped
350g Arborio or Canaroli rice
salt and pepper
1 glass dry white wine
1.5l fish stock
20 fresh Gozo aspapragus spears, chopped. (retain a few tips to garnish)
a squeeze of lemon juice
50g grated pecorino
a small bunch of fresh marjoram and parsley, finely chopped

1. Wash and peel the prawns. Heat some extra-virgin olive oil in a large pot and add the prawn shells. Stir fry them for 5 minutes, then cover them with water.

2. Bring the pot to the boil and season with a little salt. Now, lower the heat, cover the pot and let it simmer gently for 15 minutes. For a stronger prawn flavour, run the shells and liquid carefully through a food processor, then strain the mixture well through a fine sieve or mouli. For a milder taste, simply strain the liquid. You should end up with approximately half a litre of stock.

3. In a large pot, melt the butter on low heat. Add the chopped onion and stir fry it until it softens. Add the chopped tomato and cook for 1 minute. Throw in the rice and stir it to coat the grains. Increase the heat, douse the rice mixture with the white wine and leave it to evaporate. Season with salt and pepper.

4. Start adding the warm prawn stock a ladleful at a time, while stirring the mixture constantly until the liquid is absorbed. When all the prawn stock is used up, continue with the fish stock, adding as much as needed until the rice cooks. I prefer my risotto to be al dente. This normally take about 18 minutes.

5. When the rice is cooked, remove the pot from the heat, add the prawns and asparagus, and stir in the cheese and lemon juice.

6. Add the herbs and a little extra-virgin olive oil. Serve at once garnished with a few asparagus tips.

Poached Asparagus with a Mustard and Cream Sauce

Making Hollandaise is a daunting prospect for many, although it is not that difficult really. This sauce works just as well and is super simple.

Serves 4
Preparation and cooking: 30 minutes
Recommended wine: Chablis premier cru or grand cru

YOU WILL NEED

2 bunches Gozo asparagus
500ml fresh cream
75g unsalted butter
2 teaspoons English mustard
Salt and ground white pepper
a handful of fresh white breadcrumbs
extra-virgin olive oil

TO GARNISH

edible flowers (optional)

1. Heat a little extra-virgin olive oil in a frying pan. Add the breadcrumbs and stir fry them on gentle heat till golden brown. Season, then set aside to cool.

2. Trim the asparagus and bring a large pot of salted water to the boil.

3. Place the cream in a pot and add the butter and mustard. Season, then set the pot on the heat and let it simmer very gently for 5 minutes, stirring often to prevent the cream from burning. The sauce will thicken slightly.

4. Boil the asparagus for 3-4 minutes then drain and serve with the sauce poured over and the fried breadcrumbs as topping.

Asparagus and Lampuki Tortilla Roulade

I used tortilla wraps instead of shortcrust pastry to give this recipe a slightly different take.

Serves 4
Preparation and cooking time: 60 minutes
Recommended wine: Albariño from Rías Baixas, Spain or a local Girgentina

YOU WILL NEED

1 large lampuka (approximately 1.8kg), filleted
salt and pepper
a few mint leaves
1 bunch Gozo asparagus
a few pine nuts
1 lemon
extra-virgin olive oil
2 large Tortilla wraps

1. Preheat oven to 190°C (gas mark 5).

2. Trim the asparagus by snapping away the tougher parts at the bottom end.

3. Lay the tortilla wraps on a board and place one of the fish fillets on top of them. Season the fish with salt and pepper.

4. Chop some mint and sprinkle it over the fillet. Next, lay the trimmed asparagus spears on the fish. Add a few pine nuts, a squeeze of lemon juice and a light drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil. Top with the other fish fillet, then roll up the lot in the tortilla wraps.

5. Place the roulade on a flat baking sheet lined with baking paper. Brush the outside of the wraps with extra-virgin olive oil and bake for 25 to 30 minutes. Serve on a bed of raw baby spinach leaves.

Fresh Fig, Asparagus, Gorgonzola and Walnut Salad

Figs and Gorgonzozla go together like bread with butter – a simple but delicious pairing. Adding slightly bitter, raw asparagus and earthy toasted walnuts to the equation can only elevate the recipe.

Serves 4
Preparation: 25 minutes
Recommended wine: Champagne or other traditional method sparkling wine

YOU WILL NEED

50g walnuts
6 fresh figs
1 bunch Gozo aspargus
100g Gorgonzola "piccante"
3 radishes, thinly sliced
honey to drizzle
4 slices *prosciutto crudo*, to garnish

1. Toast the walnuts for a few minutes in a dry frying pan. Set aside to cool.

2. Halve or quarter the figs and place them in a large salad bowl. Trim the asparagus and cut the spears thinly on the diagonal using a very sharp knife. Add the cut asparagus to the figs.

3. Use your fingers to break up the Gorgonzola and add it to salad bowl. Top with the toasted walnuts and sliced radishes and drizzle with a little honey.

4. Fry the prosciutto until crispy and place it on the salad as a garnish.

Gozo Asparagus and Mushrooms "al cartoccio"

This is perfect to serve when guests are invited over. Prepare the parcels in the afternoon and then pop them into the oven to cook for a few minutes just before serving.

Serves 4
Preparation and cooking: 45 minutes
Recommended wine: Bordeaux Blanc (White) Semillion-Sauvignon Blanc blend

YOU WILL NEED

2 bunches Gozo asparagus
200g mixed mushrooms (I used chestnut and portobello), wiped and chopped
extra-virgin olive oil
a few sage leaves
salt and pepper
1 handful parsley, finely chopped
100g *ricotta salata*, shaved

1. Heat some extra-virgin olive oil in a frying pan. Add the chopped mushrooms and season, then add the sage. Cook, while stirring, on high heat for a few minutes

2. Remove the pan from the heat and let the mushrooms cool slightly. They should be only partially cooked at this stage. Stir in the chopped parsley.

3. Trim the asparagus. Cut four large pieces of baking paper and place them on a flat surface. Distribute the asparagus evenly between them and top with the mushrooms. Drizzle with extra-virgin olive oil then fold in the edges of the paper and twist them together to create well-sealed parcels.

4. Preheat the oven to 190°C (gas mark 5). Place the parcels on a baking tray and cook them in the oven for 8 to 10 minutes. Serve at once.

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Asparagus and Ricotta Tart

This is the perfect light supper dish. A salad on the side and some crusty Maltese bread completes the meal. You will need 4 small round baking trays for this recipe. Foil ones are ideal. I cooked the eggs in a sous vide bath at 64°C for 1 hour. You could poach them in salted water to which you have added a teaspoon of white wine vinegar.

Serves 4
Preparation and cooking: 40 minutes
Recommended wine: A light and crispy Pinot Grigio or Chenin Blanc

YOU WILL NEED

2 sheets of ready rolled puff pastry
300g ricotta
50g grated Parmesan
salt and pepper
juice of ½ a lemon
1 handful parsley, finely chopped
about 40 spears of Gozo asparagus, trimmed
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
50g roasted hazelnuts
a few Parmesan shavings
4 eggs

1. Mix the ricotta with the grated Parmesan. Season with salt and pepper and add the juice and parsley. Mix well.

2. Lay the pastry on a floured work surface and cut out four 12 cm circles. Drizzle the baking trays with a little extra-virgin olive oil and place 10 trimmed spears in each.

3. Carefully and gently spread the ricotta over the asparagus. Cover the filled trays with the cut pastry rounds and press down very gently. Brush the surface with extra-virgin olive oil.

4. Heat oven to 200°C (gas mark 6) and bake the tarts for 20 minutes. Remove the trays from the oven and turn them over onto serving plates. Serve garnished with the roast hazelnuts, Parmesan shavings and a soft poached egg.

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THE LIGHT TOUCH

A reshaped layout and contemporary fittings turned an old Rabat house into a brightly lit home

Design: Kco Design by Martina Fenech Adami and Gaby Herbert
Photography: Ramon Portelli

The designers' main task was to create an open plan space which would flow effortlessly

Old houses offer plenty of character, their history accumulated in quirky odd corners, rambling layouts, and stone walls that could tell stories if only they could speak. Though not unique to Malta, the combination of thick limestone walls, colourful cement tiles, and winding stone stairs, carries residual memory even long after a house's first inhabitants have moved on, promising a feeling of "home" to anyone who has yet to live there.

But what makes a house look charming at first glance can be less than ideal to live with. Lifestyles have evolved and expectations differ. Contemporary lives don't always fit into quaintly shaped spaces, yet simply ripping a house apart and replacing everything destroys the homely feel that made it attractive in the first place. Reshaping a traditionally built house to suit a new owner requires a trained eye.

When Kco Design was selected to design the living and kitchen area of a traditional townhouse in Rabat, they found it was had plenty of stunning and inspiring traditional features to work with.

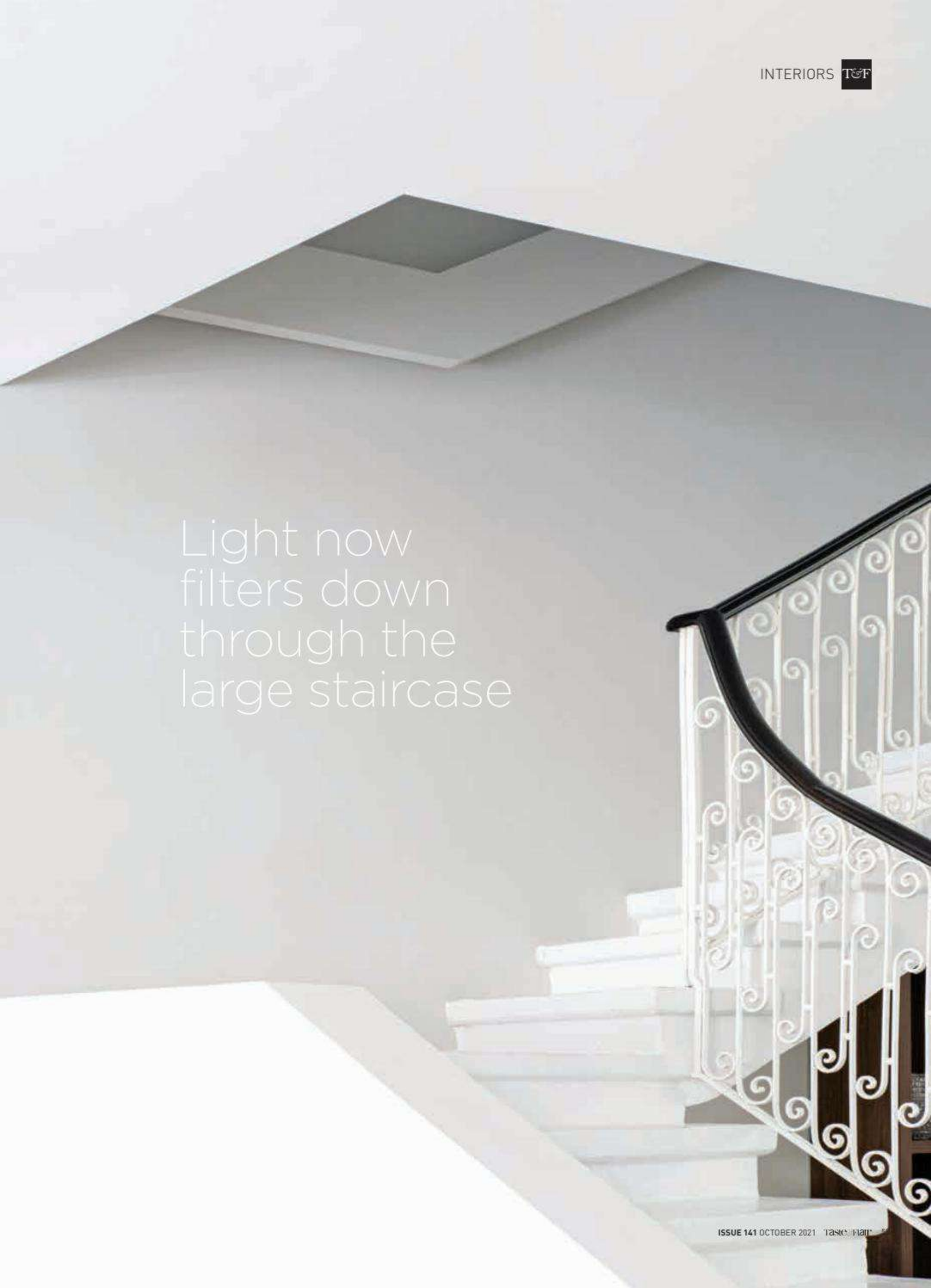
The principal design challenge was the house's perimeter, which tapered into an almost triangular layout that made the existing internal spaces feel restrictive and awkward. The designers' main task was to create an open plan space which would flow effortlessly and make the slanted wall seem purposeful without compromising functionality or aesthetics.

Rather than drawing attention away from the angled wall as a problematic feature, the designers gave it a primary role when removing other walls to reorganise the internal space. The angled wall is now the backdrop to bespoke cabinetry in the kitchen and dining room and to the wooden wall panelling in the living room. In contrast, the other vertical surfaces were left bare, creating visual tension between the opposing walls.

The central stone staircase was restored and the black wrought iron railings brought back to life, standing out against the light taupe wall. Natural light now filters down through the large staircase and bounces off the surrounding customised wooden joinery, brightening up the interior.

The footprint of the walls which were removed was filled in with a light grey concrete that frames the existing patterned cement tiles. The continuity of the original patterned tile flooring and the wooden wall panelling and cabinetry seamlessly links the two spaces together.

A bold, functional and seamless Carrara marble breakfast bar was designed to softly partition the sociable dining area from the working kitchen. The arrangement separates the working area from the entertaining space, while encouraging socialising across the divide, allowing the host to engage with guests.



Light now filters down through the large staircase

The customised joinery turns from solid, warm wood shelving into a blend of blue-grey lacquer base cupboards, wooden upper cabinets and eventually off-white high units. These visually dissolve into the bright sunlight that now pours in through the floor-to-ceiling apertures that denote the courtyard at the back of the house.

Brushed gold fittings offer a modern final touch to the space which is complemented by furniture and light fittings from an eclectic mix of brands sourced and procured outside Malta. The contrast between what was offered by the original house, and what was lovingly added, was carefully considered and balanced against practical requirements to ensure a symphony between the old and new. ■

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Design the perfect laundry room

The laundry and utility room in your home is probably not the first thing that comes to mind when one speaks about practicality and style. Although often overlooked, this space has the potential to become a stylish powerhouse aimed to make your daily chores more bearable while maximising and improving storage facility – creating a work space you love to use. Chores don't have to be all doom and gloom after all.

The layout: Make a sketch

Start by thinking about what you need in your space. How much storage and what kind of units do you need? You might want to experiment with having some exposed storage, leaving some open space or you may decide to go for the cleanest, sleekest design that conceals everything. Do you need pull-out drawers, a sink and place to store all your brooms and mops? Do you need a place to hang some laundry or that one shirt that you want to leave out for the next day? Do not limit yourself to what is conventional or traditional; Nobilia laundry and utility units go above and beyond.

Think about the layout for your washing machine and tumble dryer. You can have them side by side on the floor or built into your cabinets. There is the option to stack them on top of each other to save space, in which case you will need a stacking kit.

The workhouse: Picking the right laundry appliances

Think about the innovative features that brands like Bosch are now integrating into their laundry appliances. Use Home Connect to start your laundry at the right time before you get home and monitor everything, even while you're out of the house. Keep updated with the status of your laundry and make the chores work around you, instead of working around them. Same goes for your tumble dryer: Choose an appliance with the right settings and conveniences for you. Just like the Bosch WTX88RH9GB – Series | 8 with settings like Allergy +, Cottons, Shirts/blouses, Connected Dry and anything in-between, to take care of everything from your beloved woollens to your sportswear. It also cleans itself and has an anti-vibration design for greater stability and quietness to keep you and your neighbours undisturbed.

Are you the once a week kind of person who does everything on the weekend or the type to do laundry almost every day? And are you washing clothes for the little army you call family or are you a bachelor or bachelorette? Take this into consideration when checking the maximum load size of your washing machine and tumble dryers.

Tip: *We recommend you put a couple of water bottles or weights into a laundry basin and average how that compares to the average weight of your loads. People often overestimate how much their clothes actually weigh.*

Make the right choice: Seek expert advice

If you are intrigued by the idea of enhancing your utility room, get in touch with the experts at Oxford House. They will provide you with an appliances and furniture consultation to tailor the functional space you deserve.

For more information visit www.oxfordhouse.com.mt or the Oxford House showroom at Triq L-Imdina, Zone 2, Central Business District, Birkirkara CBD 2010 between 09:00hrs and 19:00hrs or on Saturday from 09:00hrs until 13:00hrs.

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BEAUTY & SPLENDOUR

A priceless collection amassed over a lifetime was inaugurated earlier this summer at the Cathedral Museum in Mdina.

Photography: courtesy of the Cathedral Museum

BEAUTY & SPLENDOUR

The Mdina Cathedral Museum's collection of historical artefacts and artworks is undoubtedly one of Malta's most impressive, including prints by the German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer, paintings by the Italian artists Mattia Preti and Agostino Carracci, and a work by Caravaggist painter Mario Minniti. In the museum's 50th year, restoration and renovation work began on the Rococo Sala Nobile and the adjacent chapel exquisitely decorated with trompe l'oeil marbling and religious paintings commissioned to Antoine Favray.

In the Sala Nobile, the frieze that runs at ceiling height around the circumference of the hall has now been restored and a one-metre high trompe l'oeil marbled dido circles the hall at floor level. The 14 beams that span the width of the ceiling have been decorated on three faces in the original design discovered by the restoration artists. The marble floors have been restored to their former glory and soft furnishings in rich silk lampas complement the hall's splendour.

The Sala Nobile is a fine setting for the display of the latest addition to the Museum's collection: a priceless collection of antique paintings sculpture, silverware, Venetian glassware and fine furniture, donated by Dr John Bugeja Caruana and which was inaugurated earlier this summer.

Taste&Flair invited the Cathedral Museum's director, Mgr Dr Edgar Vella, to describe the collection and its sumptuous setting.

On the 25th August 2021, the Mdina Cathedral Museum inaugurated a new hall completely embellished with important works of art from the generous donation of Dr John Bugeja Caruana. This space is a showpiece of a refined 18th century Maltese household, thus allowing the visitor to enter into a time capsule and travel back to the opulent Maltese baroque period when enchanting palaces dominated the aristocratic scene and stimulated the tastes of refined people towards all that is beautiful.

The collection is the result of a life-long passion of antiques collecting to which the donor dedicated sixty years pursuing the finest items. The collection includes paintings by distinguished artists such as Mattia Preti, Antoine Favray, Stefano Erardi, and others. The furniture collection includes some of the best examples in Malta with pieces which are manufactured in the most impressive carpentry techniques. Their richly veneered surfaces intricately inlaid with wood and ivory intarsia *are a sight to behold.*

The collection on display also includes fine Maltese silver artefacts from the Knights' period and other small treasures that capture the attention of visitors. Among the objects are fine Venetian glass items, Capodimonte mythological statuary groups, and other small wonders.

The hall has been fully restored and revamped to host this collection which is set in the most lavish manner captivating all who visit it. The whole ensemble is orchestrated with fine drapes to create an enthralling atmosphere where one might imagine Bishop Alpheran himself in his fine ecclesiastical regalia greeting his guests.

The whole project involved many people who contributed and worked hard for the best results and to create another stunning space in Malta where all art lovers can roam, appreciate, and enjoy.

Mgr Dr Edgar Vella
Director, Cathedral Museum

BEAUTY & SPLENDOUR

"The collection is the result of a life-long passion of antiques collecting to which the donor dedicated sixty years pursuing the finest items."

Valletta Harbour scene - unknown Maltese artist

Maximilian Pfeiler (1656-1746) - Still life with fruit, gilt ewer and Murano glass

An eighteenth century mirror reflects Antoine Favray's portrait of Grand Master Emmanuel de Rohan which hangs on the opposite wall.

Richly veneered surfaces intricately inlaid with wood and ivory intarsia are a sight to behold

The collection on display in the Sala Nobile was inaugurated earlier this summer. The chosen fabric for the soft furnishings by Camilleri Paris Mode is a rich silk lampas, in which various metallic weaves are used to design the eighteenth-century-style decoration on a rich silk ground. The marble floors in the Sala Nobile and throughout the museum's other galleries were restored by Halmann Vella.

BEAUTY & SPLENDOUR

The furniture collection includes some of the best examples in Malta.

About the Cathedral Museum

The building housing the museum was originally built as the first proper Seminary of the diocese of Malta. It fulfilled this purpose from the mid-eighteenth century until the early years of last century.

The building was the initiative of Bishop Paul Alpheran de Bussan, who had been appointed to head the diocese of Malta in 1728. In 1734, he decided to establish a building dedicated to the preparation of novices in the Cathedral city of Mdina, which he financed himself. It was completed within eight years and inaugurated in May, 1742.

The Cathedral Museum is equipped with a lift and ramps, and all halls at the museum are accessible by wheelchairs, pushchairs and mobility scooters. It is the first in Malta to facilitate access specifically for people on the autism spectrum.

https://www.metropolitanchapter.com/mdina-cathedral-museum/

See Taste&Flair October 2019 for a longer article about the Cathedral Museum building.

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Painstakingly developed over two decades, Ta' Betta grew from a weekend family hobby into a boutique producer of fine wines with personality and aging potential.

Labour OF Love

Interior architecture & lighting: camilleriparismode project & design studio
Architects & structural engineers: TBA Periti
Photography: Brian Grech; Albert Camilleri / The Concept Stadium

Photo: Albert Camilleri / The Concept Stadium

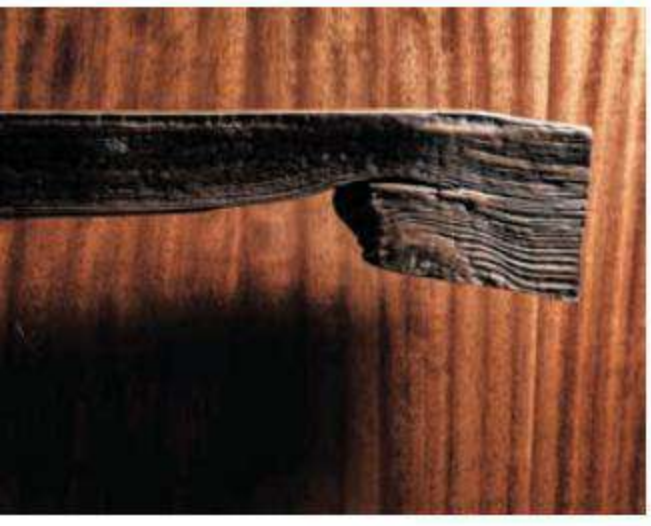
Good ideas are like wine. Some are promising at the start and enjoyable for a while, but eventually they turn sour and are discarded. Others develop slowly, nurtured over time as they age to their full potential. The story of Ta' Betta wine estate is much like that.

In a small island, there are few places one may go to escape the madding crowd, where the only noise is the hum and rhythm of nature. This idyllic moderate-sized estate is one of them. It is situated in Girgenti, off a country road amid farmland and in sight of Mdina, on a relatively high vantage point where the temperature is typically cooler than elsewhere on the islands, allowing the vines better rest in winter and more prolonged maturation in the summer.

Photos: Albert Camilleri / The Concept Stadium

The estate's four hectares are terraced with some 15,000 vines – clones of noble grape varietals Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, and Chardonnay – and 200 olive trees planted in lines that stretch down from a seemingly old building. The weathered limestone exterior looks aged, its barn-like teal-coloured doors thrown open in apparent anticipation of a harvest. On the approach to the right, water pours from a village pump in reconstituted stone into a fountain basin. Close by, low-growing native shrubs and flowering plants spread across the ground and silvery-grey olive trees sway gently in the breeze. Round the back of the building, the gnarled trunk of a 700-year old olive tree catches the eye.

Old and new. Above: Air conditioning units in the barrel vaults are hidden in rock hollows behind wooden panels. Part of the rock face was left visible, for visual texture. Below: The concrete waffle ceiling was cast in situ.

It wasn't always like this. Though the estate seems to have been rooted here forever, it was established fairly recently, pieced together from patches of farmland acquired over several years by its owners, Juanito and Astrid Camilleri. The building is not merely a functional adaptation of a pre-existing structure. It is purpose-built and fashioned to blend with its environs, but behind that weathered exterior is a sophisticated industrial set up which includes a mechanised wine press and refridgeration system, a fermentation chamber, a barrel cellar and wine library, and a dispatch room for orders of the estate's fine wines.

Photos: Brian Grech

The structure is a mix of contemporary and traditional elements. The concrete waffle ceiling above the fermentation chamber was cast in situ; the colourful egg-shaped fermentation tanks imported directly from California. To house the wine cellar at the back, a stone structure with (appropriately) barrel-vaulted ceilings, was hand built by a father and son team of master stone masons.

The vaults house barrique stacks where the red wines are matured and the white wines fermented. Wheeled racks ease the task of rotating the barriques, when necessary. In the wine library, behind the glass wall between the fermentation chamber and the cellar, bottles of estate wines of various vintages are stored on wall-mounted racks in Corten steel that were custom-made in Italy.

The Athenaeum Spa, Corinthia Palace
Interior design: Goddard Littlefair
Architects & Execution: QPM
Project Management: Fiona Carr Pierre Micallef
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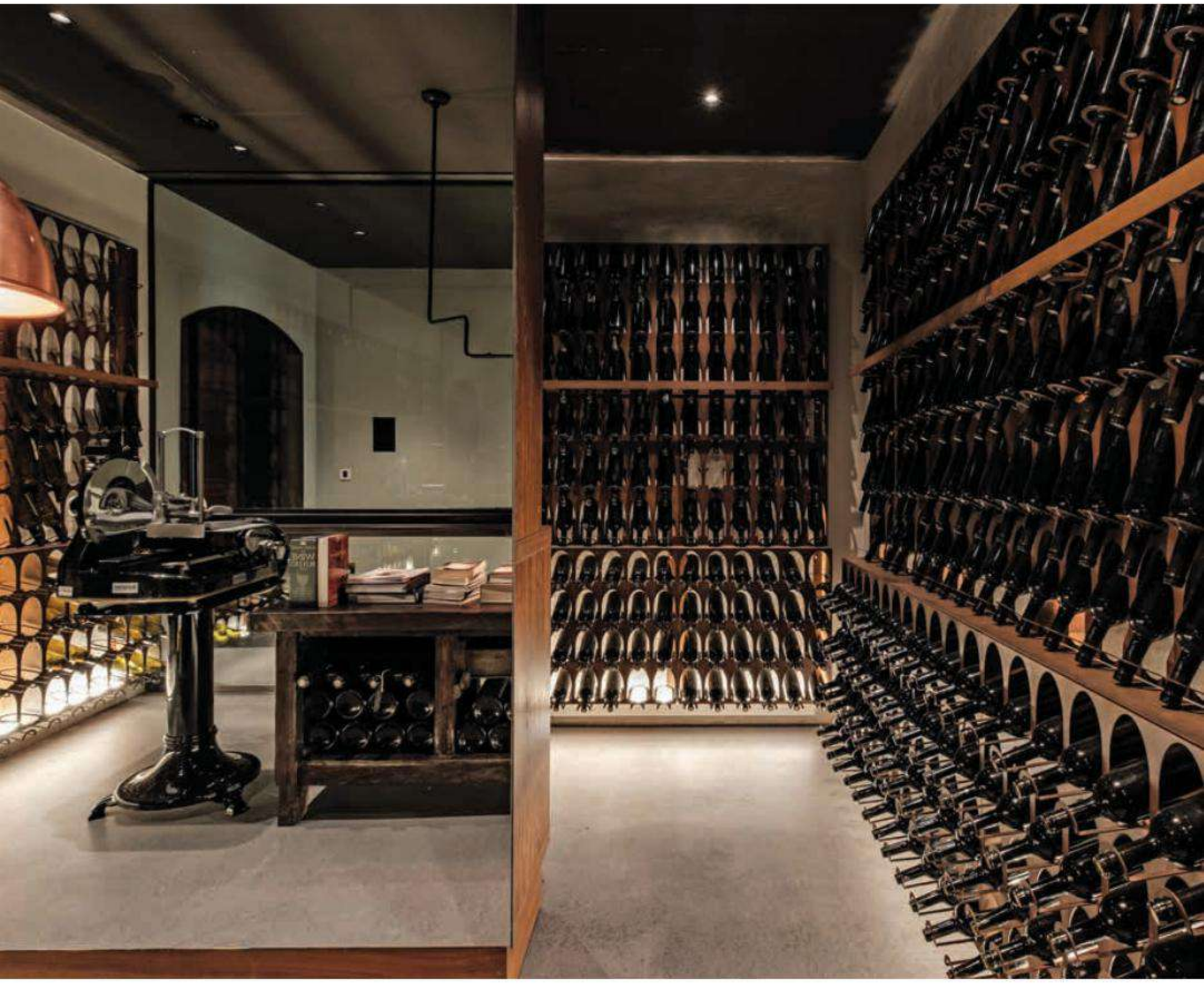

The wine library - the customised racks hold wines from the estate's various vintages.

The large internal doors in wood and steel were specially designed and made here in Malta. Steel frames line the open doorways, their width extending an inch beyond the walls, protecting the stonework from accidental damage when barrels and bottles are moved around. The flooring material is utilitarian, a composite of concrete resin with marble dust that is seamless, hygienic and easy to maintain.

The interior is pristine, its atmosphere Zen-like with soft and soothing lighting. There is none of the visual clutter one might expect in an industrial space.

Photos: Brian Grech

All the functional services are hidden: internal wiring embedded invisibly in the walls, pipework and other essential engineering sunk into a channel that runs around the outside of the building. In the cellar, the air conditioning units are tucked into hollows carved into the rock and hidden behind steel-framed wooden cabinet doors. A glass panel set into each frame offers a glimpse of the raw rock face, a rough visual texture in an otherwise smooth interior.

This is a working winery but in places it feels like a private home with consistent styling, meticulous detailing, and functional antique pieces that add character: a carpenter's bench serves as a sink support in the bathroom, a grocer's counter and storage unit sit in the dispatch room where orders are prepared. The detailing extends to the bathroom signage, where the silhouette of the estate's logo is seared into the design, and to the lift cabin which is fitted out in a style that complements the winery's interior while meeting all regulatory safety requirements.

An antique carpenter's bench adds character to the bathroom. The marble flooring and cladding are by RLautier Natural Stone Workshop.

The steel staircase to the upper level is a transition from darkness to light. An overhead skylight allows natural light to flow into the stairwell, an introduction to the bright upper level and tasting room. Here, all is light and airy, with plenty of natural light streaming in through the large apertures with views over the vineyards and olive groves at the front and the garden terrace at the back.

Pillars in reconstituted stone support a groin vaulted ceiling, simulated by clever use of plywood treated with an aged plaster effect. Here, too, services are kept out of sight, with air conditioning units, a refridgerator and storage space shielded behind custom-made cabinetry brought in from Florence. The floors are in travertine supplied by RLautier Natural Stone Workshop, cut and laid to run in a continuous line from the vineyard terrace at the front through the tasting room and all the way through the garden terrace at the back.

On the upper level, pillars in reconstituted stone support a groin vaulted ceiling, simulated by clever use of plywood treated with an aged plaster effect. The travertine flooring is by RLautier Natural Stone Workshop

In the tasting room, at a large zinc-topped rustic dining table, visitors are hosted to sample the estate's wines. The first harvest of reds was in 2006, white followed two years later. Production began in a modest rural room at the far end of the estate, which the owners refer to as "chateau garage", in a nod to the informality of the production setup at the time.

It was the success of that early experiment that inspired the decision to build today's boutique winery. Some 12 years of research and 15,000 vines later, Ta' Betta launched its estate wines on the market, each named, according to its character, for a Grand Master of the Knights of Malta. What motivated that choice? "We wanted them to convey something of the wines per se, which speaks for this terroir and school of winemaking," the estate owners say, "but also to say something about our heritage." You could drink to that. ■

Photos: Brian Grech

SLOW, BUT STEADY

Natural shapes bring life to an interior. Megan Mallia explores the enduring appeal of the tortoise motif.

Regal with its head lifted in a salute to the sun, and brisker in pace than popular belief would have it, the tortoise is an enchanting creature. It's no surprise that the motif crept into interior design, never quite exiting the scene. The trade in tortoiseshell as a material was banned a few decades ago, yet authentic tortoise shells are still found on the market, sold as desirable and costly antiques. Artificial ornamental tortoises have a different sort of appeal – they're affordable and environmentally-conscious without compromising on style.

Being a beautiful, pleasing shape, and typically quite detailed in the grooves and patterns of its shell, an ornamental tortoise is a lovely addition to any home or garden – and a quirky one at that. Its curved outline breaks up the linearity of bookshelves and other hard furnishings, and somehow, perhaps because of the gentle nature of its living equivalent, it makes a place feel more welcoming.

Large unglazed clay tortoises look right at home in a garden, aging gorgeously, and miniature ones of different colours and sizes scattered along shelves and other surfaces add charm to a room. A single tortoise can be used as a paperweight on your desk; an eclectic creep of tortoises collected through the years makes an unconventional display.

The tortoise itself has cultural significance, which perhaps has added to its decorative appeal over time. It has been considered an auspicious animal throughout history, being associated with fortune, endurance and wisdom. In China, it is one of the four sacred

creatures said to make up the Chinese constellations, each of which represents a cardinal direction. The Chinese classic text Shan Hai Jing said that the Black Tortoise, a mythological creature known as Xuanwu, had oracular powers. Since people in the Shang Dynasty faced the north when practising divination, Xuanwu became the god of the north – resulting in the belief that placing a tortoise ornament in the north of one's house courted good fortune.

For the ancient Greeks the tortoise was a symbol of fertility, which is exemplified in the representation, in classical statuary, of Aphrodite standing with her foot propped on a tortoise. The tortoise was also said to be sacred to Hermes, the messenger of the gods of Greek myth. In one version of the story, a nymph by the name of Chelone angered Hermes by refusing to attend the wedding of Zeus and Hera. As punishment, Hermes threw Chelone's house into the river and transformed her – curiously – into a tortoise. From Chelone's misfortune the Greeks derived the word for tortoise, *chelone*, and today, the order in biological classification to which tortoises and turtles belong is *chelonia*.

Perhaps most famously of all, the tortoise is a symbol of persistence. In Aesop's famously loved fable that has been retold countless times, the tortoise beats the seemingly more agile and over-confident hare in a race as a result of its perseverance, bringing to life the expression "slow and steady wins the race". With some patience, too, one could find the perfect ornamental tortoise for one's own living space. It's the next best thing to having a real one crawling around the garden. ■

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Taste&Flair
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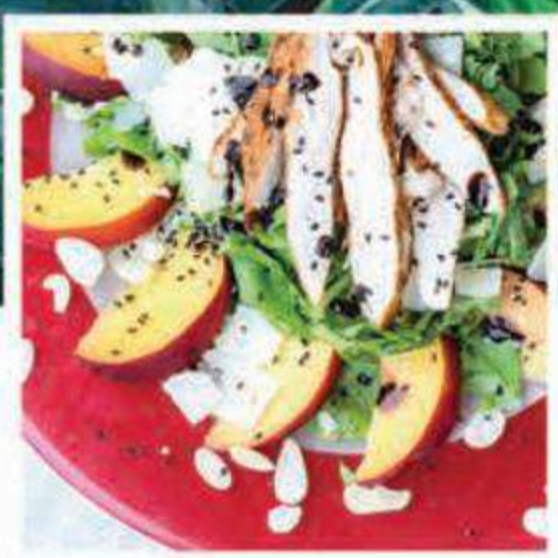

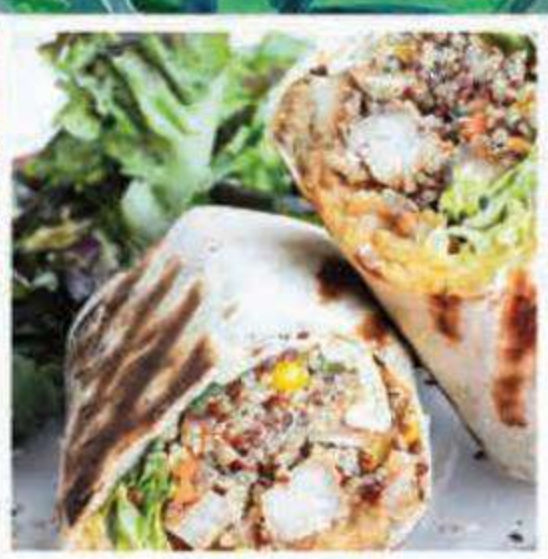

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